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Bill Zwecker

State's Film Industry Liaison Quits

After four years as the high-profile director of the Illinois Film Office, Brenda Sexton is stepping down -- submitting her resignation to Gov. Blagojevich, effective Jan. 31.

Calling her tenure a "wonderful, interesting and demanding experience," Sexton is expected to be succeeded by filmmaker Betsy Steinberg, who is a vice president at Towers Productions in Chicago and worked on the governor's re-election TV commercials.

Though largely unknown to the local or national film communities when appointed to the job, Sexton has worked hard to further raise the profile of the state with Hollywood decision makers, most notably helping spearhead the drive to pass an effective tax incentive package through the Illinois legislature in 2003 -- substantially improved by a renewal bill passed last year.

For Sexton -- and anyone who understands the importance of the film community to Illinois -- the bottom line has always been about creating jobs. "During my first calendar year, 2004, we created three times as many jobs as the previous year -- from 5,000 jobs in '03 to more than 15,000 jobs in '04," said Sexton Monday.

That year was a major high point -- with such projects as "Ocean's Twelve," "The Weatherman," "Batman Begins" and "Roll Bounce" shooting in the state, some for several months.

More recently, the TV show "Prison Break" marked the return of episodic television to the state -- joined by big-screen films such as "The Break-Up," "The Ice Harvest," "Stranger Than Fiction" and John Cusack's upcoming independent film "Grace Is Gone," premiering this month at the Sundance Film Festival. Sun-Times columnist Richard Roeper and Sexton will host a special event tied to that screening.

When she was first appointed, a number of filmmakers here grouched to me about Sexton's inexperience and claimed her appointment had resulted due to help from her ex-husband Blair Hull, a big-money Blagojevich supporter.

Yet, from the moment she stepped into the job, Sexton proved her naysayers wrong.

Having closely watched her over the past four years, I've been very impressed by her willingness to go all out to market Illinois as an important filmmaking destination.

She may have stepped on a few toes, but in the end Sexton has largely accomplished her goal of putting our state back on the moviemaking map as far as those tough studio executives in Hollywood are concerned.

She deserves our thanks.